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TAGS: [IS](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF DRUSE LEADER
JUMBLATT

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) For better or worse, Walid Jumblatt may well be the single person most responsible for where we are in Lebanon today. He was a warlord in the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war and became a pillar of the post-Ta'if Agreement "pax Syriana." Lately, however, he has emerged as the most important surviving member of the 2004-2006 Lebanese movement to end Syrian interference. Over the past year, in an astonishing display of breaking political furniture, the mercurial Jumblatt has encouraged Lebanon's more timid politicians to face the critical challenges in Lebanon: Bashar Asad's culpability in the murder of Rafiq Hariri, the myth of Lebanese sovereignty over Shebaa Farms, Iranian/Syrian control of Hizballah, and finally, the bete noire of Lebanese politics, the truth behind Hizballah's "resistance" and its powerful militia. His influence with parliamentary leader Saad Hariri is considerable, and his public speeches provide momentum and backbone to the March 14 coalition and the wavering reform movement. Despite his once ugly rhetoric about us, Jumblatt -- who lost his father to Syrian assassins -- and his advisor, Minister of Telecommunications Marwan Hamadeh -- himself the target of a near successful assassination attempt in late 2004 -- can give Washington policy makers an unvarnished perspective on Lebanon's reform movement, as well as regional relations, particularly Syrian and Iranian influence, objectives, and capabilities. End summary.

JUMBLATT THE "REVOLUTIONARY"

2. (C) Walid Jumblatt, member of the Lebanese Parliament and minister in several cabinets over the years, is the most important surviving member of the movement to end Syrian interference in Lebanon that took on steam in summer 2004. He inherited leadership of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) -- like the Phalange, a Janus-faced combination of a traditional clientele and a modern political party -- from his father, Kamal Jumblatt, following Kamal's assassination (almost certainly by Syrian agents) in 1977.

3. (C) With his exquisitely furnished ancestral castle in the Chouf mountains, surrounded by supplicants (if not serfs), Jumblatt admittedly makes for an unusual "progressive socialist." With his long hair and predilection for blue jeans, Jumblatt clearly enjoys affecting a "leftist revolutionary" image. He is candid about his past dalliances -- now long over -- with the Soviet Union, during a time when the Cold War was one level of conflict in the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war. (He once gave us a deadpan defense of

his friendship with the Kremlin at the time: "They gave us (the Druse) lots of ammunition.") His surprising collection of "socialist realism" oil paintings on the walls of his mountain castle, and the Soviet military decorations and other contraptions scattered throughout its rooms and hallways -- which, while affected a bemused air, he likes to display to visitors -- are the last vestiges of that bygone era.

JUMBLATT THE DRUSE

¶4. (C) The Druse, variously estimated at three to eight percent of Lebanon's population of approximately four million, are heirs to the early footholds established by Ismaili Shi'ism in the Levant in the eleventh century. While they went into demographic decline centuries ago, the Druse have made up for dwindling numbers with intense communal solidarity and military prowess. There is a sense among many Druse that they are the "real" Lebanese, the Ottoman-era core of modern-day Lebanon having essentially been a Druse and Maronite entity. These traits have given Jumblatt, as a Druse leader, more influence than his community's numbers might otherwise have justified.

¶5. (C) While the President of the Republic must be a Maronite, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of Parliament a Shi'a Muslim, Lebanon's system of confessional politics sets aside no high public office for the Druse. Despite the Druses' military tradition, the Lebanese Armed Forces are dominated by Maronites. In a partial attempt at redress, the 1989 Ta'if Agreement called for establishing an upper house of Parliament, a Senate, to be presided over by a Druse -- presumably Jumblatt. This provision of Ta'if has never been implemented, however. The

restrictions of Lebanese confessionalism tend to be a source of some resentment -- and a chip-on-the-shoulder attitude -- among many Druse.

JUMBLATT THE POLITICIAN

¶6. (C) Jumblatt currently heads a 17-member parliamentary bloc, a major element of the 71-member (out of 128 members of Parliament) majority headed by his ally, Sa'ad Hariri, son of assassinated former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Jumblatt's status as a communal leader has become all the more absolute with the decline of his distant-number-two rival for Druse leadership, "Prince" Talal Arslan, a Damascus-aligned lightweight. Even so, his parliamentary bloc, known as the "Democratic Gathering," is multi-confessional in makeup -- with more Christians than Druse -- and not restricted to PSP members.

¶7. (C) Jumblatt is a key figure in the so-called "March 14 forces," which -- through the Sa'ad Hariri-led majority -- is the main base of support in Parliament for Prime Minister Siniora's reform-oriented government. Paradoxically, Jumblatt is no reformer. The Druse have done relatively well in the spoils system that is Lebanese governance. As a cabinet minister overseeing the gigantic slush fund that is the Fund for the Displaced, Jumblatt was more intent on distributing bounty to the Druse community than on promoting the return of Christians to the post-civil war Chouf region. While Jumblatt is now perhaps the strongest advocate for ending Syrian interference in Lebanon, Jumblatt needs to be engaged on Lebanon's urgent need for genuine reform.

THE VERSATILE JUMBLATT

¶8. (C) Jumblatt is infamous for changing his position, often dramatically and with little apology or justification ("I changed my mind" tends to suffice for him). We see an underlying consistency to his notorious lack of consistency, however. No matter what his position on an issue, he always appears to be driven by two constant motivations: 1)

parlaying a position based on leadership of a small communal group into a more powerful political role for himself, and 2) best positioning his Druse community, protecting them from outside threats -- and being seen by them as doing so. Once when asked about his reputed political versatility, he gave us a typical bug-eyed shrug, spread his hands outward, and said, "I have these 200,000 Druse I have to look out for."

JUMBLATT BEYOND THE POINT OF NO RETURN?

¶9. (C) These days, however, the nimble Jumblatt almost seems to have a death wish. It is worth noting that, after Jumblatt engaged Christian opponents of Syrian control of Lebanon in 2001, a death threat conveyed by the Ba'athist then-MP Assem Qanso, along with other forms of pressure and no sign of international support for Lebanese sovereignty, convinced him to fall back into line. Lately, however, Jumblatt has shattered one political taboo after another, particularly regarding Hizballah and the Syrian regime, despite the fact that the Syrian regime has by now imposed (as he put it to us once) "one hundred" death sentences on him.

¶10. (C) Jumblatt knows that the SARG has only to be successful in carrying out just one of those "hundred" death sentences to succeed in taking revenge on him. It seems that, in his mind, he has crossed a point of no return. He is convinced the Syrians or their Lebanese allies will assassinate him, and wants to go to his grave knowing that he told the truth.

¶11. (C) When a broader, cross-confessional opposition to Syrian interference began to form following the Syrian-engineered extension of President Lahoud's term in office in 2004, some of its members expressed trepidation that Jumblatt might revert to type and switch sides on them yet again. (MP Samir Franjeh even asked Jumblatt to provide just a little advance notice, please, once he decided to defect.) Nowadays, Jumblatt's allies seem to have little to worry about in this respect. Indeed, Jumblatt is smart enough to know that switching sides again would not be sufficient life insurance against the Syrians and their Lebanese allies who are furious at his "betrayal."

JUMBLATT AND THE "INDEPENDENCE INTIFADA"

¶12. (C) Jumblatt's role in Lebanon's uneven transition to sovereignty has been critical and visible. He started this decade in a loose alliance with Rafiq Hariri and various moderate Christian MPs. Lined up against them were President Lahoud and the security apparatus that Jumblatt detested, as well as Hizballah and various anti-Hariri and pro-Syrian ministers and MPs. In 2004, as the Syrian regime began to maneuver with its Lebanese allies to extend Lahoud's term in office, Jumblatt teamed with Hariri to try to block it. He was the public face of the anti-extension effort, while Hariri with the UN, France, and the United States behind the scenes.

¶13. (C) In the face of considerable pressure, Jumblatt led his parliamentary bloc in voting against the unconstitutional extension on September 3, 2004. Days later, he pulled his bloc's ministers out of Hariri's cabinet -- in opposition to the fact that the cabinet had forwarded the extension request to the parliament -- and became a leader of the growing opposition movement to Syrian interference. The die was cast and since that day, Jumblatt has wasted few opportunities to challenge Syria, Iran, Hizballah, and -- more recently -- those who believe the "resistance" movement is justified and inviolate.

¶14. (C) Following Hariri's assassination in February 2005, Jumblatt has taken the lead in challenging empty assumptions and conceits used by anti-reform forces attempting to reverse democratic gains. The most compelling aspect of Jumblatt's

campaign to completely sever Syrian and Iranian influence in Lebanon is that it comes from a genuine Muslim leader (albeit one from a sect that orthodox Muslims would consider heretical). The same positions put forth by a Maronite leader would not have had the impact Jumblatt has had on Lebanon's body politic. Although the trajectory of his public oratory regularly overshoots mainstream thinking, his speeches and interviews shape public opinion and debate. Beginning in 2005, Jumblatt was the first politician in Lebanon to accuse publicly the Syrian regime of political terrorism in the assassinations of his father, Kamal Jumblatt, and former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. His rhetorical blasts against the Syrians unnerve many Lebanese leaders, and have probably increased the threat of his assassination. Official Syrian statements, as well as those from Hizballah, have accused him of treason and being the "lackey" of the U.S. and Israel. But most reasonable observers in Lebanon, remembering his past, sharp criticism of U.S. policy in the region, recognize that Jumblatt calls his own tune.

¶15. (C) In addition to his no-holds-barred criticism of the "criminal Asad regime," and its collaborators still active in Lebanon's security services, the Druse leader also took on Hizballah and its Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. In late 2005, Jumblatt publicly questioned the previously sacrosanct concept of the "resistance" and its militia. After initially defending Hizballah's arms, he has become the most vocal proponent of UNSCR 1559 in Lebanon and chides other politicians, particularly FPM leader Michel Aoun, for unwisely offering Hizballah political cover for its state-within-a-state status. When Aoun announced a "cooperative alliance" with Nasrallah on February 6, Jumblatt sarcastically asked if Aoun thought he now had the presidency within his grasp. Jumblatt regularly calls for the complete and immediate implementation of 1559 and states that Hizballah's arms distort the entire political process due to the organization's allegiance to Damascus and Tehran. With refreshing candor for a Lebanese politician, he has acknowledged that his former support for the "resistance" was a serious mistake, and has said that as long as Nasrallah receives aid and direction from Tehran, the organization can never contribute to Lebanon's nation building effort.

¶16. (C) In a related matter, Jumblatt has publicly stated that Shebaa Farms is irrelevant at best. He alone among Lebanese politicians has presented documentary evidence that the disputed area along the Blue Line was never considered Lebanese territory, until Nasrallah made the claim in 2000 -- and since then, Hizballah has conducted a relentless public relations campaign to redraw previously unquestioned boundaries. In his discussions with the Embassy and, increasingly, even publicly, Jumblatt has acknowledged that Shebaa is a false issue, carefully designed to bestow veto authority concerning disarmament to both Syria and Hizballah.

It was this declaration and its corollary -- that Hizballah's arms were no longer justified and an serious impediment to democratic progress -- that led to scathing denunciations from Hizballah headquarters in Haret Hreik and

also from Damascus. Again, the aspect that generates such ferocity from Nasrallah is that this shibboleth-shattering criticism comes from an authentic Muslim leader. It is probably safe to assume that both Bashar and Nasrallah would dance on Jumblatt's grave.

JUMBLATT AND LAHOUD

¶17. (C) Perhaps Jumblatt realizes the irony of a Druse feudal warlord, who inherited his position, fighting for the constitutional transfer of power from Lahoud to a presidential candidate committed to Lebanon, but that is simply another aspect to this unique figure. There is no denying his willingness to risk all for the chance to unseat Lahoud. Jumblatt understands that by taking on the Syrian-controlled president, he is taking on Bashar Asad, the Syrian security services, and their Lebanese friends. In the

unexpected February 14 surge of popular support for reform in Martyr's Square, Jumblatt excoriated Lahoud as the "Syrian puppet," calling for his immediate removal and describing him as the central element of Syrian influence in Lebanon. He has told the Embassy that he believes Lahoud, through his authority to veto any appointment or statute, is the single most serious impediment to democratic change.

¶18. (C) Perhaps reflecting a faint echo of his warlord past, Jumblatt has called for street demonstrations to force Lahoud to resign, so that parliament can constitutionally select a successor. Whether he is willing to risk violence to achieve the ouster of Lahoud is not yet known, but his stubbornness and acknowledged courage have definitely given some backbone to the normally cautious political elite. Veteran Maronite politician MP Robert Ghanem said as much in a conversation with the Embassy this week. Ghanem conceded, that even allowing for Jumblatt's unpredictability and knack for provocatively stirring the pot, Jumblatt was the essential member of the March 14 coalition. His experience, independence, and Islamic credentials allow him to take positions and break barriers that no one else in the coalition could attempt.

¶19. (C) While many other political decision makers appear to be placing an inordinate amount of confidence in Nabih Berri's "national dialogue" conference scheduled for March 2-12, Jumblatt believes that the ostensibly well-intentioned forum cannot truly deal with the complex issues of Syrian-Lebanese relations, Hariri's assassination and UNSCR 1559, because at least one member (Hizballah), and possibly a second (Michel Aoun), are not able to make the independent decisions necessary for a comprehensive resolution of the crisis. In Jumblatt's estimation, the strategy with the greatest chance of success of removing Lahoud (and opening the way for political and economic reform) remains popular pressure, similar to the mass demonstrations that ultimately drove Syrian troops from Lebanese territory.

JUMBLATT AND US

¶20. (C) Jumblatt's visit to Washington affords policy makers and area specialists an opportunity to receive blunt, well-considered opinions and explanations of regional affairs that are based on long experience. Conversations with Jumblatt will not be dull. The positions that he evinces will be those that best serve his interests; the cases that he makes are the cases that protect best his position and the status of his people. He should be drawn out, to the extent possible, on the practicalities of economic reform as an issue high USG interest. While Jumblatt is probably our best friend in terms of an anti-Lahoud, anti-Syria, anti-Hizballah, and anti-Iran message, he is not naturally going to gravitate toward supporting the type of economic and political reform that might weaken his grasp on the Druse leadership.

¶21. (C) Jumblatt has certainly not always been our friend. He has been a harsh and irrational critic of the United States at times, and has made ugly comments about certain high-ranking U.S. officials. Indeed, he has occasionally directed more than just words at us. For example, in 1983-84, Syria provided his Druse militia with artillery and ammunition to use against U.S. forces deployed around Beirut's international airport.

¶22. (C) At the same time, it is a fact that Jumblatt's positions -- on Syrian and Iranian interference in Lebanon, on the need for an investigation into Rafiq Hariri's assassination, on Hizballah's obligation to disarm, and on

the bogusness of the Sheba'a Farms problem -- are in remarkable and unprecedented alignment with U.S. policy. Nothing in the world is for certain, but -- for the reasons described above -- we do not see Jumblatt shifting dramatically anytime soon. We see his recent personal apology to Secretary Rice -- and the personal apology he

seeks to make to former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz when Jumblatt sees him in Washington -- as further examples of an effort to secure some peace of mind while he can.

TALKING TO JUMBLATT

¶23. (C) Jumblatt speaks fluent English, French and Arabic, is an accomplished raconteur, and has personally known almost every major political figure in the Levant for the last thirty years. Jumblatt knows his history well, but appears to believe that history is not destiny. He is not a democrat, but he appears to understand that democracy is the best guarantee for the rights of his people. Jumblatt speaks candidly and does not flinch when asked straight questions, even those that reflect poorly on his past actions and judgment. He has a refreshingly tendency to admit his own mistakes.

¶24. (C) Oddly, Jumblatt is often more sensationalist in front of the press than he is in private meetings. It is as if the presence of television cameras brings out a desire to make the top of the news. In front of crowds, he can go particularly wild. Many thought his crowd-pleasing anti-Syrian harangues during the anniversary commemoration of Rafiq Hariri's death went "too far." (To us, they reflected the truth and provided important political cover for others.) In private meetings, he will probably need to be drawn out at first.

NOTE ON MARWAN HAMADEH

¶25. (C) Minister of Telecommunications Marwan Hamadeh will accompany Jumblatt on his Washington appointments. Hamadeh was seriously injured in an October 2004 car bomb assassination attempt, but has since recovered and is fully engaged in Lebanon's political process. He is convinced that Hizballah carried out the attempt on his life at the direction of the Syrian regime. As a result, he is vigorously anti-Hizballah and pro-disarmament. Minister Hamadeh is a close political ally and senior advisor to the Druse leader and, as such, will defer to Jumblatt in meetings.

FELTMAN